When the time nears for his entrance into the Haram (sacred territory), every pilgrim divests himself of his clothing in order to don a new kind of uniform - an unstitched plain, white garments which serve to heighten his consciousness of entering a new world. The very act of shedding his normal clothes (and with them all signs of status and ethnicity) signifies that he is separating himself from the way of life peculiar to his environment, and is now ready to become suffused with such emotions as are desired by God. In this way, thousands of men, in casting off their own hues, take on the hue of the Almighty and beginning to utter godly words - *'Labbaika Allahumma labbaika!* Here I am, O God, here I am!'

On reaching Makkah, the pilgrim must perform *tawaf* (circumambulation). To do this, he enters the house of God, the great mosque in whose spacious central courtyard stands the Kabah, which was erected by the Prophet Abraham in ancient times. Then he goes round the Kabah seven times to demonstrate his willingness to make God the pivot of his whole existence.

Labbaik (here I am) does not mean just that the pilgrim has come to stay in Makkah. It means that, "I am ready to obey You (God)."

After the *tawaf*, there comes the ritual of *sa'i*, which entails brisk walking from the hill of Safa to the hill of Marwah and back again. This procedure is repeated seven times in symbolic enactment of a promise, or covenant, to expand all of one"s energies in the path of God. The form which this ritual takes can be traced back to the Prophet Abraham's wife Hajar, running from one hill to another in a frantic search for water for her young baby when they first arrived there.

The most important period of worship during hajj is the day-long sojourn on the plain of Arafat. It is indeed, an awesome spectacle, with people from all over the world, clad in identical, simple, white garments, chanting, "Lord, I am present, Lord, I am present." This serves to impress upon the mind of the pilgrim how great a gathering there will be in the presence of God on the last Day of Reckoning. Another practice during hajj is the casting of stones at Jamarahs. This is a symbolic act through which the pilgrim renews his determination to drive Satan away from him. In this way, he makes it plain that his relationship with Satan is one of enmity and combat. The next step for the pilgrim is to turn this piece of symbolism into reality, so that he may be purged of all evils, for all the evils besetting man are there at the instigation of Satan.

After this, the pilgrim sacrifices an animal to God, an act symbolizing the sacrifice of the self. In making such a sacrifice, the pilgrim indicates his willingness to forsake everything for God. His faith is such that if it comes to giving his life—the last thing that he would normally be ready to part with —he will not hesitate to do so in the service of God.

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Hajj
The Pilgrimage to Makkah

The Importance of Hajj

Hajj is the fifth pillar of Islam. It is incumbent only upon those Muslims who have the ability to undertake it. It has to be performed only once in a lifetime. However, one who has the ability to perform it more than once may perform it as many times as he likes. These additional performances will be counted as voluntary ones.

Why does hajj have such a great reward? The reason is that hajj, in fact, is symbolic of total submission and humbleness before the Almighty God. Leaving all his relatives, a pilgrim is drawn towards the House of God (*Kabah*), aroused by sentiments of pure love of the Almighty God. These sentiments of love and submission are demonstrated in various forms: in the form of circumambulation (*tawaf*), brisk walking (*sái*), kissing the black stone, offering prayers at different places and occasions, throwing pebbles at Jamarahs (*ramy*), the shaving of heads and the slaughtering of an animal, etc. All these rites show a pilgrim's total submission and utter humility.

> Whoever performs hajj only for God's sake and does not indulge in evil deeds or sins will return (after hajj) as pure as the day his mother bore him.
>
> The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ

The Spirit of Hajj

Hajj may be defined as a rehearsal for purposeful living such as was demonstrated by Ibrahim when he fulfilled the divine mission 4000 years ago. Living a purposeful life, he set an ideal example for posterity. The stages that Ibrahim had to go through in the process are symbolically observed by a pilgrim. During a specified period, a pilgrim re-enacts the historic events of Ibrahim's life, thus renewing his zeal to emulate him. He will reflect in his living what Ibrahim had done in his time.

The rituals of hajj are, in reality, the different stages of this purposeful kind of life. What one has to go through, having opted for such a life, had already been experienced in totality by Ibrahim. In every age, the faithful have to repeat the entire ritual in order to live a similar life. The true pilgrim is one who performs the rites of hajj with this intention, and experiences such sentiments.

Let us put this another way and say that it is not merely a matter of going to Makkah and returning. There is much more to hajj than that, hajj has been prescribed so that it may inspire us with new religious fervour. To return from hajj with one's faith in God strengthened and rekindled - that is the hallmark of a true pilgrim. Hajj only takes its place as a supreme act of worship when it is undertaken in its true spirit, and performed in the proper manner. It will then be the greatest act in a pilgrim's life: he will never be the same again.

> The rituals of hajj are, in reality, the different stages of this purposeful kind of life.

A Journey to God

The journey to perform hajj is a journey to God. It represents the ultimate closeness to God one can achieve while living in this world. Other acts of worship are ways of remembering God; hajj is a way of reaching Him. Generally we worship Him on an unseen level; during hajj, we worship Him as if we are seeing Him face to face. When a pilgrim stands before the Kabah it seems to him that he is standing before God Himself. He is then moved to revolve around the Lord's house, like a butterfly encircling a flower, clinging to His doorstep like a slave begging for his master's mercy.

> When a pilgrim stands before the Kabah it seems to him that he is standing before God Himself.

The house of God in Makkah is one of God's signs on earth. There, souls which have strayed from the Lord take comfort in Him once again; hearts which have become hard as stone are brought low before Almighty God; eyes which have lost their vision are filled with divine radiance. But these blessings of hajj are available only to those who come prepared for them. Otherwise, hajj will be just a tour, a visit which leaves no lasting impression upon the one who makes it. This is the spirit of hajj which must be kept alive by the pilgrims.

The Message of Hajj

One special aspect of hajj is that it makes people remember God's scheme of things, which was first made known in Abraham's day, and fulfilled in the days of the Prophet Muhammad.

When a man leaves his home and country to go on such a pilgrimage, he brims over with all the emotions aroused by the thought that he is embarking on a course which will lead him directly to God. He is, in effect, sloughing off his own world, leaving it behind him, and reaching out for the world of the Almighty. He is on his way to the House of God.